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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 05 CAIRO 004221

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

FROM REGIONAL REFUGEE COORDINATOR  
FOR PRM/A, PRM/ANE, PRM/MCE, AND NEA/ENA  
DHS FOR BCIS ROSS ANDERSON  
ROME FOR DHS ANNE ARRIES CORSANO  
GENEVA FOR RMA  
ATHENS FOR DHS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [SA](#) [EG](#) [UNHCR](#)

SUBJECT: ERITREAN MILITARY GROUP IN KSA PROPOSED FOR  
RESETTLEMENT.

Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

References: (A) Riyadh 3189; (B) Jeddah 1644

1.(U) Embassy Riyadh and Congen Jeddah have cleared this message.

2.(U) This is an action request. See para 21.

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Summary  
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13. (SBU) Cairo-based Regional Refugee Coordinator Cheyne visited Riyadh and Jizan with International Organization for Migration (IOM) Operations Manager, Jeanette Camarillo from May 28-31. The visit was in response to a request from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Geneva, through its regional office in Riyadh (Reftel A), for the USG to consider resettlement in the U.S. for a group of 215 Eritrean asylum seekers in Jizan. We have concluded that the Eritreans - all ex-military - appear to be an easily definable, finite group with reasonably sound refugee claims and would be good candidates for a group referral to the USRP in accordance with the profiling methodology recently developed by UNHCR Geneva. We recommend that UNHCR be encouraged to submit the Eritrean profile through Geneva to PRM accordingly. End Summary

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Visit to Saudi Arabia  
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14. (SBU) As reported in Reftel A, UNHCR approached Embassy Riyadh on May 14 to convey a request from UNHCR headquarters for the USG to consider resettlement for a group of Eritrean military personnel who had sought refuge in the southern Red Sea town of Jizan. Cairo-based Regional Refugee Coordinator Cheyne subsequently visited Riyadh and Jizan to meet with UNHCR, with Saudi Arabian Government (SAG) officials and with the Eritreans themselves to assess their suitability for the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program (USRP). Cheyne was accompanied by Jeanette Camarillo of IOM, one of our refugee "Overseas Processing Entities" (OPEs) for the region. In Riyadh we met with UNHCR Regional Representative, Ahmed Gubartalla and his deputy, Karim Atassi. In Jizan we visited the refugees with UNHCR RSD Consultant Lianne Engelkes, and met with General Saleh bin Ibrahim al-Sanatly, head of the local Coast Guard contingent, which is taking care of the Eritreans.

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The Caseload  
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15. (SBU) The Eritrean Military Group (EMG) comprises 212 cases (215 individuals). Most of them are ex-navy with three air force and several army personnel. With the exception of three, who arrived in late 2002, the Eritreans arrived in the Jizan area in small groups between June 2004 and May this year. There are three women in the group (also military) and two children. More than 70 percent are young single males aged 17-35. Approximately two-thirds are married with families in Eritrea. The majority are Orthodox Christian. Apart from the air force personnel, who arrived by helicopter, the Eritreans crossed the Red Sea in small groups by boat, some of them naval vessels.

16. (SBU) Most of the Eritreans are Tigrinyans with a few Saho, Afar, and Tigrenians. They are from both rural and urban areas. Most have had primary and some have had secondary school education. A few are college graduates and some are officers. But most claim to be lower ranks. The embarkation point for the trip to Saudi Arabia was normally through the port of Massawa.

## Conditions

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17. (SBU) The Eritreans were apprehended by the Coast Guard upon arrival in Saudi Arabia and initially placed in various military and penal institutions in the area. Most of them have now been moved to a collection center recently built by the Coast Guard specifically for this purpose. The pilots are being held by the Ministry of Defense on a nearby island and the women are in prison quarters pending completion of suitable housing for them at the collection center.

18. (SBU) The collection center is a converted wedding pavilion on the outskirts of Jizan. The Coast Guard provides adequate food, water, sanitary facilities, and shelter. Coast Guard medical personnel visit the center regularly to provide healthcare. Although boredom, frustration and anxiety were common complaints, the Coast Guard seems to be taking good care of the refugees to the extent of building a Mosque for the few Muslims in the group (although there was no mention of a similar initiative to provide for the needs of the Christians). A common complaint from the refugees was the lack of contact with their families in Eritrea. The Coast Guard has banned telephone contact although the refugees are permitted to write letters.

## Refugee Status

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19. (SBU) Saudi Arabia is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and has no legal or institutional framework for dealing with asylum seekers. Responsibility for asylum seekers seems to be shared on an ad hoc basis by the Ministry of Defense (e.g., for the Iraqis in Rafha camp) and the Ministry of Interior (the Coast Guard is an agency of the Ministry of Interior). With the exception of the Eritrean ex-military personnel in Jizan and the Iraqis in Rafha, the KSA generally does not acknowledge the existence of refugees in the kingdom. Under normal circumstances Eritrean asylum seekers would be deported, if apprehended, but the SAG was reluctant to deport the group that arrived in Jizan because of their military status. Local integration is not considered an option for asylum seekers. The SAG thus approached UNHCR, not to help care for the Eritreans, but to help resettle them in a third country.

110. (SBU) To date UNHCR has completed Refugee Status Determinations (RSDs) and full Resettlement Registration Forms (RRFs) for 50 cases (52 individuals). Engelkes has just completed RSD interviews for the remaining 162 cases/163 individuals. None of the Eritreans currently in Jizan want to return to Eritrea.

## The Claim

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111. (SBU) The Eritreans have similar, if not identical claims for refugee status centered on the Eritrean system of indefinite, universal, compulsory military conscription. Most have been in the military for 5-7 years without any apparent hope for demobilization. They claim to have been forcibly drafted in street round-ups or taken from their houses, roadblocks or work places. Although some have seen combat most say that during their service they were usually deployed as laborers in construction, road works and other non-combatant duty. About 80 percent had been detained at some time and claimed to have experienced beatings, torture and forced labor for resisting their prolonged conscription. According to UNHCR they had articulated their disagreement with the current regime, the lack of demobilization prospects, the severe treatment in the army and lack of education, family life and future prospects.

112. (SBU) UNHCR recognizes that desertion by itself is not always an acceptable claim for refugee status and resettlement in the U.S. However it points to the insidious practice of indefinite compulsory conscription in Eritrea as a factor that distinguishes the Eritrean cases from those based simply on desertion. Given the group's opposition to this practice, UNHCR says the Eritrean claims are thus based on imputed political opinion, membership of a particular social group (in some cases religious persecution as well), and an assumption of persecution should they be repatriated to Eritrea. UNHCR says none of the refugees appears to be excludable.

113. (SBU) The presumption of mistreatment should they return to Eritrea is probably well founded. The Jizan group is well aware of the fate of other Eritrean asylum seekers who have been repatriated against their will in recent years. Some claim to have been serving on the island of Dahlak where a group of around 200 Eritreans were forcibly repatriated after seeking asylum in Malta last year (cited

in the U.S. Human Rights Report for Eritrea). UNHCR says it is well documented that the Eritreans who were returned to Dahlak have been very badly treated and are "dying slowly" - with evidence of some extra-judicial killings. Similarly a group of Eritrean asylum seekers forcibly deported from Libya last year hijacked their plane to Khartoum rather than return to Asmara.

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SAG Attitude - Possible Pull-Factor  
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14. (SBU) The Jizan Coast Guard believes the movement of small groups of Eritrean military personnel across the Red Sea to Saudi Arabia has stopped which could suggest that the Eritrean government has taken steps to stem the flow. Comment: The Saudi Government is of course concerned that more Eritreans will be tempted to seek refuge in the kingdom but it has apparently concluded that the risk of creating a pull-factor will increase the longer the refugees stay in Saudi Arabia and that the best way to avoid this is to move the Eritreans out of the country as soon as possible. The SAG is also concerned that the continuing existence of the ex-military personnel in Jizan will be an irritant in its relations with Eritrea. This explains the SAG support for third country resettlement for the Eritreans. End Comment

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The Referral  
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15. (SBU) UNHCR Riyadh has been instructed by Geneva to approach only the U.S. in seeking resettlement for the Eritreans. Following the advice of its headquarters, Riyadh is preparing to present the Eritreans as a group in accordance with the group profile methodology devised by Phyllis Coven and her team in Geneva last year (although UNHCR has prepared full individual RRFs for 50 cases to date).

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Group Definition  
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16. (SBU) If the USRP were to consider the Eritreans as a group referral then the issue of group definition assumes some importance. The Eritrean group could be restricted to:

- those who have been interviewed and accepted by UNHCR as refugees under the UNHCR mandate (with contemporaneous records available at UNHCR's office);

- those who appear on the official Coast Guard list of asylum seekers who have arrived and who have been registered by the SAG within specified cut-off dates - (we have this list - it provides names, arrival dates, and modes of transportation);

- those who have documentary proof of military service (alternately, those who have no documentation at all - about two percent - will be admitted to the group if their candidature is supported by an authoritative narrative that supports the claim that all persons of a certain age in Eritrea are subject to military conscription which is compulsory and indefinite);

- those who have not returned to Eritrea;

- those who hold no legal residence status in Saudi Arabia;

17. (SBU) The list could be definitive and, once accepted, would not allow for the addition of family members who could be dealt with as follow-to-join visa 93 cases at a later date. This would act as a disincentive for the Eritreans to bring their family members to Saudi Arabia. UNHCR could be given the option of referring any latecomers or anyone not meeting these criteria to the USRP as individual (P1) cases.

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Processing Site  
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18. (SBU) There are several hotels in Jizan that could be suitable for refugee processing (including DHS adjudication). But the SAG seems ready to provide whatever assistance is needed to move these Eritreans out of Saudi Arabia and UNHCR is convinced that, if asked, General Sanatly would be prepared to turn over part of his Coast Guard HQ compound to the USRP for processing. The well-secured, spacious compound is just across the street from a hotel that could provide accommodation for adjudicators.

19. (SBU) If we do agree to consider this caseload the next step could be to request our OPE (IOM) and Consulate Jeddah's RSO to visit Jizan to review processing procedures and to survey possible processing sites.

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Recommendation/Action Request  
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120. (SBU) We have made no commitment to UNHCR, to the SAG or to the Eritreans concerning the Jizan group. We advised UNHCR that our preliminary conclusions were favorable and that we would forward a request for consideration to PRM. We also advised UNHCR that if we did eventually accept the Eritreans for consideration some would probably be excluded from the final group submission and others could be denied during adjudication.

121. (SBU) The Eritreans appear to be an easily definable, finite group with reasonably sound refugee claims and would be good candidates for a group referral to the USRP in accordance with the profiling methodology recently developed by UNHCR Geneva. We recommend that UNHCR be encouraged to submit the Eritrean profile through Geneva to PRM accordingly. If PRM concurs we would proceed as we did with the Ethiopian Navy Group in Yemen, by involving CIS, the OPE and UNHCR early in the process to apportion responsibilities and to determine the most efficient and credible way to move the group through the USRP. We would appreciate Department guidance.

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